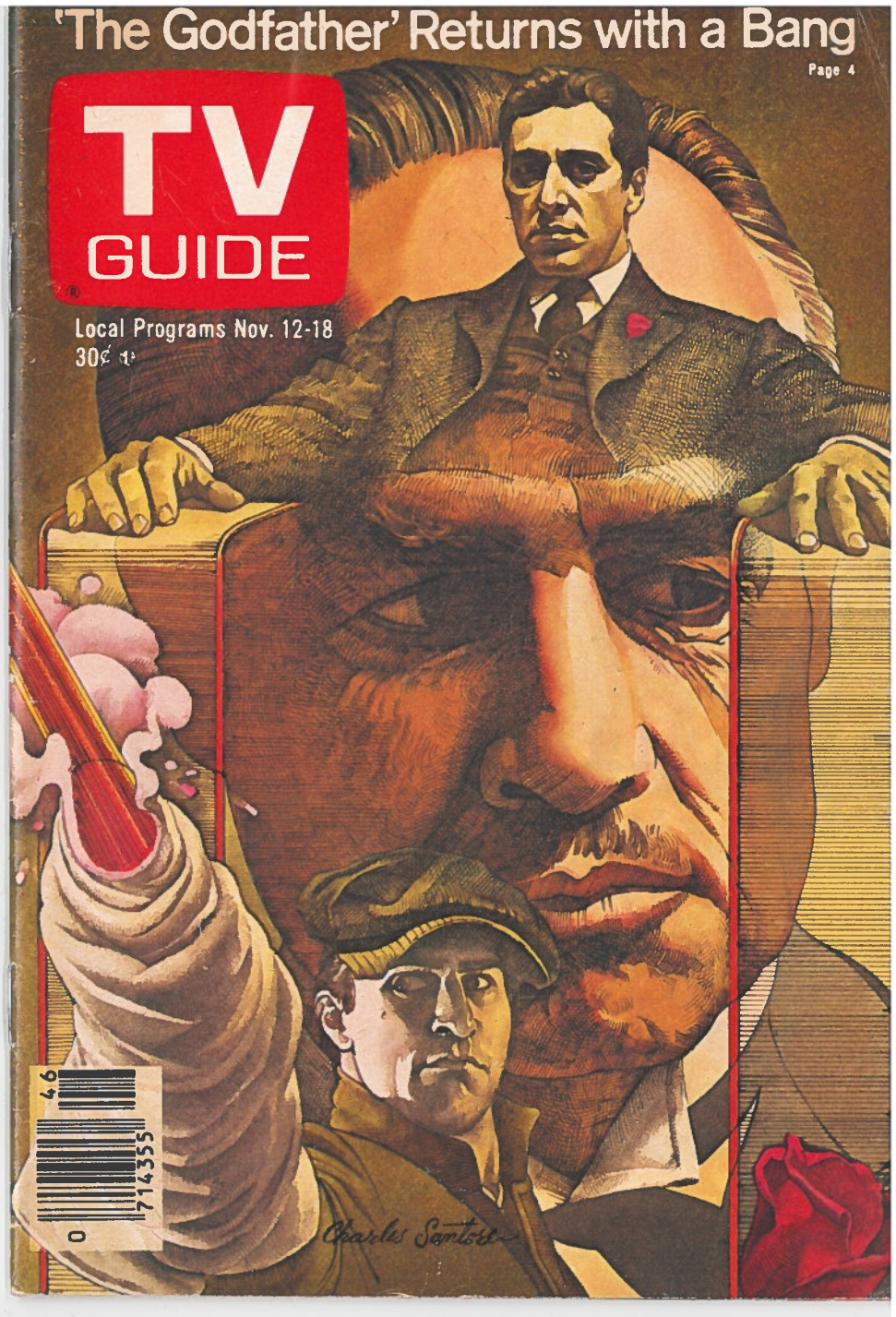
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Charles Santore

The welcome mat was slippery

In both China and Rhodesia, an American documentary maker found reality elusive

By Irv Drasnin

On the late show, the hero of Alfred Hitchcock's "Foreign Correspondent" chases stories and spies across exotic datelines and, in the end, gets both—along with the girl.

That was almost 40 years ago, before television news was old enough to travel. All Joel McCrea required in that 1940 movie was a pad, a pencil and a trench coat. He didn't need a three-man crew, 50,000 feet of film and a thousand pounds of equipment.

It's one thing to stick your nose and notebook into somebody else's business, where it may not be wanted; it's another thing to stick your camera, lights and tape recorder.

When you do, funny things can happen. Take Shanghai, for instance. At its center is a great open square vibrant with pedestrians and bicyclists.

In a matter of minutes we set down a tripod, fixed the camera, plugged in sound, focused—and the square was empty.

Beyond our peripheral vision, and control, a local Chinese official was busy detouring traffic, to make sure we would have an unobstructed shot of an imposing government building with its even more imposing portrait of Mao Tse-tung.

In small ways, and large, reality sometimes has a way of retreating before the lens. That's true in America too, but it's especially true in countries that don't share the American assumption of a free press.

My own experience has been in China and Rhodesia, fundamentally different societies with nothing in common but a passionate regard for their self-image and the way it is projected to the world.

Each reluctantly welcomes that intrepid band, the American television news team: the Chinese, to demonstrate the miracles of change, at home and in their relations with the United States; the Rhodesians, in the hope of American support in their effort to avoid fundamental change in defiance of African nationalism.

Getting off the plane in Salisbury, Rhodesia's capital, at midday, a reporter is met by printed forms asking his race, and a querulous blond teenaged customs clerk asking if he's come to distort the truth about his country.

Getting off the plane in Peking at midnight, a reporter is greeted by a red carpet, a flood-lit portrait of Mao, a limousine ride to the hotel and questions about his view of other foreign-made documentaries about China—some of which the Chinese have liked, and some of which they haven't.

The Chinese have hundreds of years' experience in managing the "foreign devils." The Rhodesians are relatively new to the task. In each instance, it shows.

There are smoke-filled rooms in China to which the reporter has access. On one side of a rectangular table sit the Chinese, those traveling with us and others representing the local revolutionary committee. On the other side are six Americans, members of a CBS News team in China to make a documentary film about the city of Shanghai.

The summer air is heavy with humidity, steaming tea and cigarette smoke; it's weighted, too, with statistics, the solemn comparisons of Chinese life before and after the two great watersheds of recent Chinese history: the Communist victory in the civil war that ended in 1949 and the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s.

It's what we heard most, a familiar narrative whether at a factory, school or commune. The problem arises from a reporter's reluctance to settle for only the familiar.

To the Chinese, it was the Americans who must have seemed inscrutable if not at times impatient, impulsive, ill-mannered or worse. It is a cultural conflict that for more than a hundred years has defied the understanding of Americans and Chinese alike.

In China, all media exist to "serve the state." That's not just a Communist idea but one that can be traced back centuries to the Imperial Archives, a view quite the opposite of our tradition of an adversary press.

It was put another way at a dinner party given by Shanghai Television. Somewhere between the duck-tongue soup and the squirrel fish, our host offered a toast, and the hope that our film would be "ideologically correct"; an impossible condition for an American journalist, even if perfectly reasonable to a Chinese.

The spontaneous, unguarded moments of daily life that the documentary journalist seeks to capture were seen only with a long lens and by hiding the camera behind an improvised shield of chicken wire in the back of a canvas-covered jeep; or behind the blanketed alcove of a teahouse; or from second-story windows and rooftops.

There were times when local officials didn't seem amused and times when they did. Something can be lost in translation. At the end of one 12-hour day, our interpreter, searching for the right idiom, said to us: "Now, you can go out and paint the town red." Double entendre aside, that was almost a wistful thought after six weeks in a place that had been cleansed of most bourgeois pastimes.

Most foreigners are also gone from Shanghai now, but there were surprises, like sitting in the garden of a walled compound listening to a well-worn recording of "Pomp and Circumstance." There were Chinese servants too and afternoon tea and badminton →

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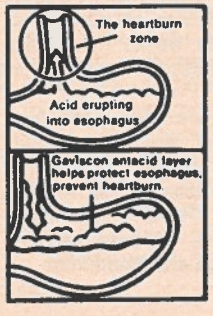

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continued

on the lawn and darts.

In Shanghai, a revolutionary storm center in recent years, there still lived and worked two British bankers. It was they, not the Chinese, who denied us permission to film. The Englishmen had walled in time as well as space. For them, it might as well have been Kingston-upon-Thames. Or Rhodesia.

In appearance and style, Salisbury's Monomatapa Hotel might as well be in Chicago or Miami, and the two men I seemed to meet casually in the lobby my second night in Salisbury might have been executives at a corporate convention, circa 1950.

They dressed in black business suits and carried attache cases. Their hair was trim, their smiles affable, their handshakes firm and confident.

"See you again," they said on departing. Undoubtedly they did. But I was never sure when, or where, or how often. They belonged to the Special Branch, the intelligence and surveillance arm of the Rhodesian police.

The Monomatapa is where many foreign journalists stay in Rhodesia. Six of the Special Branch were assigned there. Two more were members of the Quill Club, the local press club where many reporters drink, and talk.

Unknown to you, they and their network of informers (white and black) might be anywhere you go in Rhodesia.

Though race is an issue in almost every other way, it is not a factor in Rhodesian attitudes toward the foreign press. Blacks and whites alike distrust the journalist.

You can travel alone in Rhodesia. The restraints on reporting are built into the social and political system.

There is fear. In a country where a citizen can be arrested without charge, held without bail and tried (and even executed) in secret, the Special Branch is one reason why Rhodesians —especially blacks—are camera-shy.

There is resentment. The white Rhodesian feels betrayed and misunderstood by the West and misrepresented by its press. Show up with a camera at a white home, and tennis courts and swimming pools empty. Whites do not want their standards of living compared with those of blacks.

Many black Rhodesians are cynical of the outsider's interest. "Why now?" is the question often heard. "Where have you been all these years?"

If the white government had its way, we would cover Rhodesia in much the same way it is covered by Rhodesian television: the annual agricultural and cattle exhibition, a rugby match, African handicrafts, "terrorism" (the government's view of the guerrilla war being fought by black nationalists) and not a murmur of dissent, white or black.

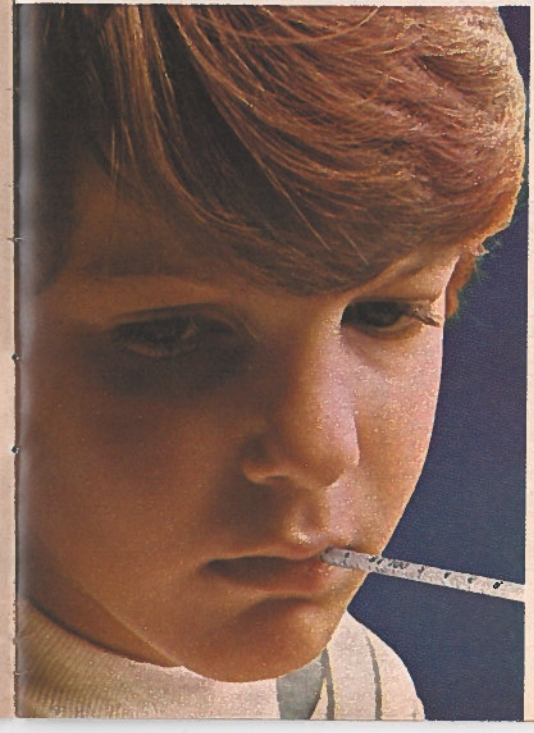
The government will take you to an army base but will permit no interviews with anyone in uniform and no coverage of combat or search missions.

There were also guided tours of the protected village, the government's controversial program that forces thousands of Africans to live inside fenced enclaves in the combat zones.

The greatest danger we met there, however, was one familiar to journalists on the move anywhere. Traveling a back road through the bush near sundown, about a mile from the nearest enclave, the station wagon carrying the camera crew and its equipment had a flat tire. A check of the spare revealed a hole the size of a cricket ball.

It was a few minutes before the 6 o'clock curfew, when anyone caught by the army outside a protected village could be shot on sight.

Neither the guerrillas nor Rhodesian army patrols, we hoped, would believe it was the enemy moving through the bush in rented white Datsuns. As it turned out, neither did, but rent-a-car companies —no respecter of guerrilla tactics or government curfews—can strike anywhere. (END)



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